

*SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA*  
RECORDING SESSIONS

*Paul M. Neville*

Moderated by LeAnna Welch-Dawson

Wednesday, June 15, 2011

William Winter Archives and History Building  
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Scope Note: The Mississippi Department of Archives and History in conjunction with the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Freedom Rides and to complement the Department's exhibit "*Freedom Rides: Journey for Change*" conducted recording sessions with local citizens to gather oral memories of the Civil Rights Era. The participants were also given the opportunity to have their photograph taken in front of the exhibit. The recordings were conducted in the spring and summer of 2011 at the William F. Winter Archives and History Building in Jackson, Mississippi.

DAWSON: Ok. Speak Now recording number 11. This is LeAnna Welch-Dawson, with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Today's date is Wednesday, June 15, 2011. Now sharing his Civil Rights Era memories is Mr. Paul Neville. Good Morning.

NEVILLE: Good Morning. When I got your email talking about experiences of the Freedom Riders—of course, I was not a Freedom Rider—I was at the time that the Freedom Rides came through I was a high school student at Meridian, Mississippi. The...I was a senior, it's 1961.

The Meridian Star had published an editorial, I think it was on the 21<sup>st</sup> of May, in which it pretty well condemned—that was when they knew the Freedom Riders were coming our direction—and they pretty much condemned the whole operation, and what particularly upset me was they, they justified the violence that had been committed against the Freedom Riders in, in Montgomery and Anniston on, on—before—and, I wrote a letter to the Meridian Star that was published in the Meridian Star the day after the Freedom Riders went through. This was on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May, 1961. Since we don't have a documented record, I'll just read it into the record. It's headed: "The People Speak: Defends Freedom Riders right to demonstrate, admires their courage" in quotation marks. And then it, "To the Meridian Star," I guess. And this is my letter:

"The events of recent days in Anniston, Birmingham, and Montgomery have left me with a certain feeling of horror, which came to a head when I read your editorial, "The bitter fruit," in the May 21<sup>st</sup> edition of the Meridian Star. In this editorial, you refer to the dozen or so students called Freedom Riders as "rabble rousers." Before this, my definition of this term has been somewhat different. I always pictured a rabble rouser as one who ran in packs, like animals, and attacked the defenseless enemy with a lead pipe. However, you have reapplied this term to a group of students who are willing to risk their lives because of the convictions they hold. One of these convictions is that they see no reason why they should be forced to stand to be served at a lunch counter when there are empty seats. Maybe I am blind, but this does not seem to be a threat to our safety or to our Southern way of life. Since when in America has it been a crime to demonstrate for something that is believed in? This country was founded because men wanted the right to think as free men and to express their thoughts without fear. If, in expressing their beliefs, these students broke any laws, let them be punished by civil authorities, not by a mob of maddened animals. Since when does the riding of a bus taunt any decent human being into attempting to bludgeon an armed fellow human to death

with a lead pipe? We may disagree with what they believe, but you have to admire them for being willing to die for it. I wrote this letter to the newspaper for a reason. I believe the newspaper is an important force for good in the community. And justly so. However, your paper has been able to find justice in mob violence, and has, in a way, condoned it. You have even placed the guilt for these atrocities on the victims themselves. How ironic. You may call me an agitator, but cannot call me an outside agitator because I was born and raised in the same town you were. We are both Mississippians, but yet it is evident, we are different types of Mississippians. Maybe I am the lesser Mississippian because I believe in law and justice and in simple human decency. I think not. I would rather think these beliefs make a good Mississippian—make me a good Mississippian—a good American, and a worthy member of the brotherhood of mankind.

Sincerely yours,  
Paul M. Neville

And I gave my address. And like I said that was published on May the 25<sup>th</sup> the day after they went through. Of course I got some reaction from this.

DAWSON: Like?

NEVILLE: Well, the first thing, Jimmy Skewes was the owner and publisher of the Meridian Star and he called me up before he published it, and he said, because he wanted to make sure it had come, it wasn't a forgery or something, and it was funny he also said, "Well, it's a little long. Could we cut something out?" And it, it had been long, and I said, "Well, we can cut out the part of about you being a fascist." And he said, he said, "Well, that's...that's my favorite part!" and I said, "No, that's not pertinent to the message." So that was cut out. I had typed this letter at the St. Paul's Episcopal Church because I didn't have access to a typewriter, and that was where I was a member, and the church had been fairly...prominent in me changing my views on segregation back then. Reverend Duncan—in fact, I had made—really changed—my views the previous year, when I was a junior in high school, and the principle source of my—I guess my father died when I was four and—Duncan Hobart was the priest at St. Paul's and had, had pretty well—not just me—but I mean he was—had—an influence on the whole church, and it was a fairly, it was a—I wouldn't say it was a liberal—but you know it was certainly an atmosphere where you didn't fear that you'd be thrown out of the church if you had views like this, and, of course, Duncan Hobart was never thrown out. Eventually Duncan Grey came to be priest for a while; you know he was the Bishop of Mississippi. The...but, it's funny, I don't plan things ahead real well, and at the time this letter came out, I was also doing a late-night program on WTOK radio—

WOKK radio—I'm sorry. Eddie Holiday, who was member of the church, ad given me a slot from 11:00 to midnight, I closed down the station, and unfortunately, I didn't have access to a car so I walked home. I was living, of course, with my mother. And I started getting calls about the letter, some threatening from the Klan, but also a lot of congratulatory calls. I remember Gene Damon, a prominent Republican who was, at the time, running for mayor of Meridian called me to congratulate me as did Gil Carmichael, another Republican—a prominent Republican—and...Rosenbaum who eventually became mayor. And the reason, Meridian was not a hostile area, it, it's got a bad reputation because it's right next to Neshoba County and some of the, the killers of the Civil Rights workers came from Lauderdale County, but they were a different minority and, did not hold much sway. I remember years later after I graduated from law school at Washington-Lee, I came back to Meridian and started practicing law. And I went out to Lonnie's one night, which is a local bar—speak-easy—and I was sitting at the counter drinking a beer and right next to me was Raymond Roberts who was Wayne Roberts' brother. Now Wayne Roberts is the purported killer of the Civil Rights workers, and Raymond was sitting there, and he said, “Paul, you know, times have certainly changed.” And I said, “Well, I certainly hope so.” He said, “Well, you know, there was a time when...when I would have been sitting here thinking how to get you outside and beat the hell out of you. But all that's changed now.” I said, “Well, that's for the good, I guess.” I got up and left anyway. But I did have some calls that were threats, both on—at—the radio station and at home. And I remember one of ‘em, specifically, this person called up and was apparently mimicking a, a black voice, and was saying he was trying to get me to take him to church—his people to my church—and I was, you know, being non-committal and finally he started laughing and dropped his black thing, he said, “Well, you know Paul, we've decided we're not gonna kill you, and we're not gonna beat you up, but you better not be doing this much more.” I said, “Oh, well you can depend on me not to do it anymore.” And I didn't necessarily mean that, but I certainly didn't want ‘em to kill me.

Another interesting reaction I got, I was hitchhiking to town, I think it was within a week of this, from my house on 19<sup>th</sup> Street, and this car screeched to a halt to pick me up, I got in the car and it was Sonny Montgomery. And Sonny was an old family friend. He was a member of...a member of St. Paul's, too. And, he read me the riot act, about my letter, and the reason—the main reason—he was pissed off is because his guard unit—you know he was, of course, in the State Senate but he was also big in the guard—and it had been called up to go down on the 24<sup>th</sup> and, I think they surrounded the buses—they stopped in Meridian for a rest stop—and, I mean, they weren't there for long but they, you know it was—I remember the picture in the paper of the all the guardsmen standing around the buses—and there was a crowd downtown, too, when they came through. But there was no violence because they were being protected, but Sonny was all pissed off. A bunch

of, he you know, he he changed his mind about the thing because—just like I did the year before—I mean Sonny, I can remember—I don't remember whether that was when Sonny died or when he retired—but I was watching C-SPAN and Maxine Waters, the Congresswoman from...from California, had been on the Armed Services Committee with Sonny, and you can't imagine two people with different views. And she was there, she, she praised Sonny, said he was always you know polite to her, and anything he could do for her all though they'd disagreed on most issues involving the military, but and I thought that was nice. But that was Sonny. He was just, he was just a good man and he helped me a lot later on in life. So he didn't...he didn't hold his views for long. I think it may have had something to do with when he went to Congress, with black people having the vote. But that's, politicians are human. But that's about it.

I can remember...I didn't, see this was my senior year, and the next year I went to Sewanee, University of the South, to school so I was out of town so I didn't really have a lotta activity in Meridian after that and, but I remember when I was up at Sewanee, it was one holiday, I forget which one, we were all—two of us were—up there...Ben Chitty and myself were watching T.V. and we hadn't gone home for the holiday, and they were talking about Martin Luther King marching in Montgomery. And I said, "Ben, if we, you know, if we got hair on our ass we'll go down there and see what's going on and do it, and so I remember Ben, we, we borrowed—one of our friends had—his father's Cadillac, that had been loaned to him, but he was—he went home for—the car was still up there, and, and Chitty had the, had the keys to it. So without telling Steve Wilkerson, we borrowed his car and headed down to Alabama. And we met in—I remember—we had a...he had gotten the information where to go and the first place we went was Birmingham, in the Overton Park area, I think, it's a real exclusive neighborhood. There's a Unitarian Church there where we first met in for some sort of training session and there were a lot of Northerners there. And I remember, it was funny the...part of the training was what to do when the dogs attack you, and the training was that you, you wrap your arm with a cloth and give 'em the right arm or give 'em the left arm and then come over their back and break their back with the, with the other arm to protect yourself. Now the little ole ladies from Connecticut didn't quite understand that...that took—put—a little different light on what they were doing. But anyway we went to—went from—then we got on buses in Birmingham, and left the car up there, and went to Montgomery for the assembly for the march and I remember it was a big—it was an old—schoolhouse, red clay all over the field and we all lined up, and I just happened to line up behind a guy who turned—and I forget his name, I wish I could remember his name—but he was a white lawyer from Brookhaven, and he had a white seersucker suit on and I can remember it and a straw hat and he had come there to hold a sign and march with, march with Martin Luther King. And, and during the march—course we were way back, I mean you know, there

were a lotta people there—and I had gotten separated from the group, and I went back to where I knew the bus was supposed to come, and it was next to a school, and I just didn't know when it was going to come, and I just figured I didn't need to be wandering around. So I sat down by a fence and there was a guard unit of the Alabama Guard, that was out there and they came over—marched over—to find out who I was...but, anyway, the bus arrived after that so I got rescued. But that's, you know, that's interesting.

But Meridian...I mean and this needs to be said, one of the reasons I think Meridian was—gets—doesn't get the reputation—or had a moderate—or even liberal...atmosphere was the large Jewish community there. And it was assimilated, you know, I grew up and I was in the DeMolays and the head adviser was Sammy Davidson who was Jewish and we went to the, went to the synagogue once a year with dates, and you know, I just never knew of anti-Semitism, until I got out of Meridian. It just never occurred to me because it was a large Jewish community. And the Klan wasn't very clever. I remember one time my Billy—my cousin, Billy Neville—was the Chancery Judge over there. And he had a big reputation of being a big Democrat and being a, a liberal on Civil Rights issues. And one time the Klan got up this “black list,” and threw it off the top—wrote it on a bed sheet—and threw it off the top of the Threefoot Building, and of course, the Meridian Star covered it and published all the names. But they weren't too clever 'cause they put everybody in the power structure in Meridian on the list. And how do you intimidate somebody when you've got 50 people on the same list who run the towns. So it was, it was funny, the Klan never did...they, they did activities, I remember, that this was, I think, in connection with the Civil Rights killings in Philadelphia, they burned a lotta churches in Meridian. And there immediately sprung up an organization in Meridian to build them back. You know I remember going to some of the, the ground breaking ceremonies, where the whites and principally the Jewish community, you know put up the money build back these churches. And also, there was a—I don't know if you remember—there was a bombing incident in Meridian where this guy who was—is—now out of jail and up in North Carolina, and has changed his views, he says—I forget—but he came over from Jackson—he was from Jackson—and came over with a bomb and tried to blow up Meyer Davidson's house on, on 24<sup>th</sup> Avenue, I believe. And—but—the police were, you know, they did not...if they had Klansmen, it was spies mainly, so they had known about this plot and they had lined the whole area around Meyer's house, and soon as he placed the bomb—course Meyer wasn't there—they tried to arrest him, and he fled, and he killed a policeman and they eventually caught him and he was sent to jail. And it's funny that my only connection with that was I happened to be out drinking that night with a bunch of buddies, and we rode up that road—my friend, Bob Hamel, lived on that street—and we let him out and left just immediately before this gun battle ensued down the road. But we were totally ignorant of that until the paper the next morning. But that's some of my memories.

DAWSON: I don't want to back track, but you said you were a high school senior when you wrote the letter.

NEVILLE: Yeah.

DAWSON: And being a school teacher, that's beautifully written, so I was...

NEVILLE: It's the best thing I've ever written.

DAWSON: I was curious to know what your English teacher at the time thought or how your classmates reacted?

NEVILLE: Well, one of them spit on me and called me a nigger lover, but he profusely—he was drunk—and he profusely apologized, and I don't remember my English teacher saying anything about it. You know I was...the trouble is the spelling. I was raised in—when I came through—especially the later days, you got in these advanced classes where you studied novels, you know. And to this day I'm a horrible speller. But I don't remember—let's see, who would have been my teacher...Miss Laura, no...I don't remember any of the teachers saying anything about this, some students did, I had a, you know lotta friends who didn't agree with me and you know, made it clear but...like I say, oh...when I was a junior—this is, this is funny—another influence on my life when I changed my segregationist views was, I was dating a senior, Linda Light, and she was a National Merit Semi-finalist and she used to ridicule my segregationist views, and talk about peer pressure...she and her friends. And so that had...that had an influence on me, too. But I don't remember the English teacher, but, like I say, I'm a spelling-disabled person. But I do feel that you know, I've written a lot of letters to the editor from since, but this is, this is the best thing I've ever written. And I think when I...when I...it helped me get into Sewanee, frankly. I think I gave them a copy of this and, although I was pretty much of a legacy, I've, I've had cousins and uncles go there. But like I say you know, like I said in the letter, I'm a Mississippian—fifth generation—the Nevilles are from Kemper County and came to Lauderdale County in the 1880s so, you know I wasn't a carpetbagger.

DAWSON: Well, thank you very much.

NEVILLE: Ok.

**END OF RECORDING**

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